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THE PAINTER WILDHERR'S STORY.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH.

By Zenobia



CHRISTMAS night, 1839, a dozen of us students were gathered together at the Golden Eagle Tavern, one of the most renowned in Carlsruhe. A bowl was confided to my care, with the important duty of filling the glasses, always empty, of my joyful confreres. Like those modest veils and wild-wood shades in which love delights to enclose its mysterious pleasures, a thick cloud, formed from the smoke which rolled from our pipes, mingled with the vapor from our generous beverage, spread softly over us, and enveloped us entirely. Our faces could be seen only confusedly, like those fantastic images which we see flit across morning mists, before the rays of the joyous sun have set the horizon free from the veil which obscured it.

The rough attacks which we had made upon the noble wine began to affect our brain; conversation, almost as cloudy as the air which surrounded us, threatened to become entirely *charivarique*, when the door of the salon opened, and our friend Wildherr, the painter, entered. He came forward, pale, sad, and anxious, as usual; but his arrival none the less excited a movement of general interest.

"Good day, Wildherr: thou art a brave boy to come;" and the glasses, struck with redoubled blows by our knives, called the host, who replenished the bowl and added another glass.

Wildherr sat down at the table, responding by a pressure of the hand to those friends who sat near him; but he kept silence, his eyes wandered sadly around him, and, when his glance met that of Arnold Blumenhagen, who was seated at the other end of the table, he trembled so violently we could not prevent ourselves from remarking it.

"Ah, well!" said Arnold, "what ails you to tremble in that fashion? Are you afraid of me?"

"What ails me?" replied Wildherr, with embarrassment, turning away his eyes. "Nothing. I do not know. How are you, Arnold?"

"By the devil, Wildherr, thou sayest that to me with an air of constraint which does not suit a good comrade!"

"I am by no means constrained. Do

not misinterpret what I say. I am sick, as you all know. Pardon me my caprices."

The fact was, that, for a long time, Wildherr seemed overborne by some physical suffering or some secret trouble. One would no more recognize in him the man who was the life and soul of our pleasure parties. Every day his sadness increased, his face became gloomier, his health more uncertain. We all loved the good Wildherr; he was so generous, so brave, full of talents and noble thoughts. We were distressed not to be able to penetrate the cause of this dark melancholy which wore out his life. This day, emboldened by the wine we had quaffed, we united our efforts to persuade him to tell us what preoccupied his mind. Arnold, especially, became so importunate that he could not resist our pleadings. After having touched his lips to the glass of wine he held, and which a few months before he would have drained at a single draught, Wildherr thus spoke, while we listened, launching new puffs of smoke upon the odorous mist which embraced us.

"My dear friends, I am almost tempted to thank you for the pressing manner with which you have induced me to relate this terrible tale. And then you can assist me by your counsels. In any case, it is to your honor and your discretion that I intrust what you are about to hear. You know that I undertook a pedestrian excursion through the Black Forest, toward the end of summer, with the intention of drawing and publishing the most remarkable spots—the interesting ruins which still exist in the midst of the forest. I had started from Carlsruhe, with a light and joyous heart, occupied with thoughts very different from those which have since assailed me, and little expecting the scenes of which I must be witness. The third day of my journey, toward eleven, one beautiful morning, I had already sketched several landscapes. The heat was stifling. I threw myself down behind a thicket to recover my strength before ascending the hill on which are situated the fine old ruins of the castle of Aldersburg, those noble vestiges of the Middle Ages. I soon perceived, on the road I had just left, four persons, who climbed it painfully. There was first a man of about fifty, still vigorous, and whose erect and majestic figure made him seem much younger. I have rarely met a finer figure than that of this man—his forehead high and open, his

eyes blue and full of fire, his eyebrows and mustaches black, his hair inclining to gray, but thick and curling. This *ensemble* gave to his face a character of martial frankness, such as an artist might desire to paint a noble soldier. By his side, and supported by his manly arm, walked a little girl about six years old, fresh and pretty as the eglantine blossoms that surrounded us. Another man, whose face I could not see, but young and of a fine stature, gave his arm to a young woman, wonderfully beautiful, pale, but whose *personnelle* breathed a languor full of softness—a most ravishing loveliness. Her eyes, like soft black velvet, surmounted by arches of ebony blackness, were animated by an inexpressible voluptuousness, to which a melancholy shade added a new attraction. With my eyes half shut by the drowsiness which seized me, I followed delightedly these travellers, who seemed like forest genii, gliding noiselessly before me.

"The road wound between thickets of brushwood and through sand, to the top of the hill, and toward the middle of the acclivity passing under a bower of thorns, wild rose shrubs, and all varieties of plants, it made a circuit into a deep ravine, hollowed out by the falling away of the sand. The two young people did not hesitate to take the advance of their elder companion, who was frequently delayed by the frolics of the little girl; they followed the road, without perceiving that at the entrance of the ravine an opening made in the copse afforded a more direct and less difficult way to the end of that into which they had entered. This last was, in truth, notwithstanding the dangers which it threatened, much more agreeable than the other, because it was sheltered from the intolerable heat. The sun penetrating only at rare intervals the dome of verdure which arched above their heads, they enjoyed a coolness which the more direct way could not have afforded them. Arrived at the middle of the ravine, precisely opposite the place where I had thrown myself, the young lady sat down to recover her breath, on a rock cushioned with moss, and her young cavalier placed himself beside her. They remained there some minutes, waiting for their companions, and inhaling the fragrant breath of roses and eglantines, and listening to the warbling of the birds which fluttered lazily in the foliage. It was indeed a charming spot. Never have I breathed air so pure

as that breeze, perfumed by the forest. The lady had taken off her straw hat, and her black hair, of which the glossy ringlets had been disordered by the heat, was thrown back upon her shoulders, and relieved the whiteness of her neck. She amused herself, when the wind lifted her curls, in directing them toward the face of her companion, who seemed gazing in an ecstasy upon her. The most passionate tenderness sparkled in the glances of this charming creature. I could not prevent myself from envying the lover of such a beautiful woman.

"The other travellers had not followed the way of the ravine. The little girl had darted into the opening of which I have spoken, and had drawn after her the man with the gray hair. While the little creature gathered an armful of flowers, singing in her happiness, I saw, not without an involuntary pressure at my heart, this unknown man follow the direct line of the way. Every step brought him near the other travellers, and a sad presentiment warned me that a drama was commencing before me. Holding my breath for fear of being discovered, I saw with terror the young lovers drawn nearer together by the charm of their affection. The old soldier had only a few steps to take to reach the end of the road, and there his view would command the ravine. I desired to advise the unsuspecting lovers of his approach, but before I could resolve to do it, it was too late. The moss on which he trod deadened the noise of his footsteps. He came silently behind the unfortunate lovers, and stopped as if struck suddenly by a thunderbolt. I saw his face change to a livid pallor. He darted upon them a look which I shall never forget. But his emotion passed away like a flash of lightning. He extended his clenched fist as if he were uttering a terrible oath, simulated a bitter smile, which chilled me, at the moment that the light sound of a blissful kiss reached his ear.

"But," said Wildherr, interrupting himself, "it is my turn to demand, Arnold, why you look at me with that wild air?"

"Your tale is so dramatic, that I cannot conceal my emotion. Continue."

Wildherr resumed:

"The little girl arrived with her hands full of flowers. The old soldier went hastily before her, made her retrace her steps, and took again the way of the ravine. The sweet voice of the child, who hummed an air, warned the young lovers.

The lady put on her hat, dropped her veil over her eyes, and, leaning on the arm of her friend, not less troubled than herself, continued to ascend the hill."

Wildherr stopped a moment, and Arnold profited by this interruption of a relation which was rapidly sobering us, to address some questions to him.

"Thou sayest, Wildherr, that thou hadst not seen the face of the young man?"

"I did not see it *then*, but *afterward*," replied Wildherr. "I have even the means of knowing his name."

"How?" said Arnold, quickly, fixing on the speaker a look full of solicitude. "How could you know his name? That is impossible!"

We looked at each other with surprise, but Wildherr, paying no attention to these singular words, continued in a grave tone:

"What I have to add is terrible! Like a true son of Suabia, I knew the obscurest corners, the narrowest defiles of the old Black Forest, and for a long time had I been accustomed to climb those rugged rocks. Drawn on by a curiosity which I must expiate with the repose of my life, I could not resist the desire of following these travellers, between whom, I was satisfied, a bloody drama was to be played. Not doubting that their course had for its end the ruins of the old castle, I rose softly, and, taking a difficult but shorter way, I hastened to find myself in the midst of the rubbish and of the towers in ruin of Aldersburg. A single edifice remains almost untouched, on the exterior at least—that is the principal tower, of which the blanched summit still appeared in the distance, high above the trees of the forest. It is an immense circular hall, formed by the ground floor of this tower, whose higher stories have been destroyed. I entered, and lay down in a balustrade, whence I watched for the arrival of the persons who had interested me to such a high degree. Pillars, clad with the remains of Gothic sculpture, whence sprung formerly the arches of the first vault, rose around the whole circumference of the hall, leaving between each of them an immense empty space. In one of these recesses a well of great diameter displayed its yawning depths. Dug in the solid rock, it was immensely deep. Several times travellers have sounded it; and I, years ago, found there more than fifteen fathoms of water. The first time I saw it, the storm howled without, the waters replied by roarings like those of the sea, and

followed the progress of the tempest. It was at first a low rumble, like the sound of distant thunder; then, according as the lightning rent the heavens, and as the thunder reverberated with a more tremendous crash, it seemed as if from the bottom of the gulf swelled the echo of these terrible sounds. The water lashed the walls, the waves smote themselves together, and mingled with the roar of unknown winds. Since then, I have often dreamed that an irresistible hand dragged me before this well; I heard the waters roar; then the fatal hand suspended me above the chasm. I struggled in vain under the iron fingers of the phantom, who sneered in my ears, and I awoke at the moment, when, beside myself and panting with terror, I was plunged into the abyss. But that day the heavens were serene, the air calm and soft, those unknown waters tranquil. I waited not long to see the travellers arrive.

"'What sweet coolness, colonel,' said the lady, as they entered. 'Let us sit here awhile, on these rocks.'"

"The colonel, for such seemed to be the rank of the old soldier, said nothing, but, with a frigid seriousness, he made a sign of assent. After a repose of a few minutes, the colonel proposed to guide them over the ruins. I thought I saw in his manner an agitation which his companions did not discover, and I shuddered at the expression of his face, where I read hate and thirst for vengeance.

"'George,' said the lady to the young man—"

A deep groan here interrupted Wildherr's narration. We looked at Arnold, who seemed beside himself. Wildherr rose and fixed his eyes steadily upon him, but Arnold turned away.

"What an astonishing resemblance!" said Wildherr, in a low voice. "Arnold, I saw the face of the young man, when he turned to reply to the lady. He resembled *thee*. Speak! do you know him? Without your light hair, could I believe what I see, I should say it was *thou*!"

Arnold made no response. He rose, and gaining the door at a bound, he rushed into the street, without any of us dreaming to arrest his movements, so complete was our amazement. Wildherr had fallen back into his chair, and gazed at us with a wandering stare.

"Shall I go on?" he said, feebly.

"The lovely woman asked the arm of the man she addressed as George, and

whose features had so much likeness to Arnold's. The colonel made them admire, with an air of distraction, the remains of the splendid paintings that still decorated the walls. I saw that one secret purpose controlled him. This thought I guessed, for it was not necessary to be very deep-sighted to discover in the young people that they were lovers. After a few minutes they approached the well, the young woman and her cavalier with curiosity, the colonel with a dark and sinister air.

"I have scarcely strength to finish my relation. 'Here,' said the soldier, 'is a gulf which recalls tragic memories. See, Eleanore, how beautiful it is still!' He circled her unresisting form with his arm, and lifted her to a level with the parapet which surrounded the well. 'See,' he commanded.

"The young woman looked down into the darkness.

"'Terrible, colonel! How dark it is! It makes me afraid; and I know not what sounds come out of this well. Oh! George, if one should fall in there!'

"'One would not return again,' said the officer, with a grave tone, still holding her helplessly suspended above the chasm.

"I was breathless with excitement. An inexpressible fatality, an unknown power fixed me to the stone which sustained me. I wished to fly, but I could not—to cry out, but my voice died away in my breast. I was doomed to see, without power to prevent a crime.

"'Are you curious to know the history of this well, madame? Hah! I am going to tell it to you,' said the soldier, with a horrible smile.

"'But, for Heaven's sake, do not hold me in this position meanwhile. My head grows giddy,' said his poor, trembling victim.

"'Oh, do not be afraid, fool that you are. You see, I clasp you firmly. Now, look within the well, while I shall tell you the story.'

"'Father,' cried George, 'do not terrify her.'

"'Of what would she be afraid, sir?'

"'O my beloved husband, you are cruel,' said the lady, writhing in the grasp of the powerful arm that clasped her waist.

"'Come, then, listen to my tale. One of the old lords of Aldersburg, him, I believe, they called Hildebrand, had wedded a woman, noble and beautiful, who

bore him two sons. He had the misfortune to lose her after fifteen years of the happiest married life, and the misfortune, a hundred fold greater still, to seek in a new union to forget his griefs. He married a young and beautiful girl. He was happy for a while. She gave him a sweet daughter. But one of his sons returned from the army. A flame was kindled on the hearth-stone of old Hildebrand. Deceived in his confidence, horribly betrayed in his affections by those dearest to him, what do you think he did?'

"'O my God! have mercy on me!' murmured the young wife, turning pale as the dead.

"'My father!' cried George, in agony.

"'Hah! tell! what do you think he did? He bound the wretches and plunged them with his own hands into this well! He avenged himself!'

"'O George, I am lost,' shrieked the lady, with a heart-rending voice.

"There was no more time. George sprang forward, but it was too late. One terrible shriek alone rent the air. Then I heard the whizz of a body that seemed to cleave the tangible darkness of that awful gulf, striking on the right and the left with a dull reverberation. Then, one last dreadful shock. My eyes closed. At the moment when George felt the iron clutch of his father's hand, I should have fallen into the ditch of the castle, if the narrow opening of the balistraria would have permitted my body to pass. The child fell at the feet of her father, crying.

"'O my mother.'

"I saw no more. I was recalled to life by a frightful scream. I glanced into the tower; George was there no more. The officer, with disordered dress, as if after a desperate struggle, carried the little girl in his arms. He strode out swiftly from the ruins. I leaped to my feet; I wished to seize the murderer; but a portfolio, which I picked up near the well, delayed me a few minutes, which sufficed to make my pursuit vain. When I reached the gate, I could see the soldier rapidly descend the hill, throw himself into a carriage which awaited him, and all disappeared in a cloud of dust, gilded with the sun's rays. I fainted again."

Wildherr was silent. None of us were in a state to break the silence. Carle Hautelman at length said:

"You spoke of a portfolio, Wildherr; did you open it?'

"No: I know that in it are enclosed

the names of the actors in this drama. But I have not been able to resolve to look upon them. What must I do, my friends? These horrible memories leave me no judgment. I hear continually in my ears the cries of the victims. Counsel me—ought I to seek out the murderer, and deliver him up?'

"Certainly," said I, "under any other circumstances, your duty would be to expose such a crime. But here, it cannot be denied that there is something extenuating in behalf of the unfortunate colonel. And then, before taking a decisive step, would it not be necessary to discover what part our friend Arnold can have in the facts you have related to us? Where is the portfolio?'

"At my house. Do you wish that I should go for it? I leave myself to be guided by your advice," replied Wildherr.

At the moment when I started to accompany Wildherr to his lodgings, a servant rushed into the room, bearing on his face unequivocal signs of mortal terror.

"Ah, gentleman!" he exclaimed, "what a terrible thing! My master is dead! M. Arnold has killed himself!'

The poor fellow gave to Wildherr a letter which he had found, with his address, on his master's table. It contained the following information:

"I believed the secret of blood and death shut up between Heaven and me. Since destiny has made you master of it, Wildherr, learn the sequel. The colonel was my father; the unfortunate lady was my stepmother, and the young man was George Blumenhagen, my brother; my little sister is an idiot. As to my father, after having revealed to me, in the delirium of fever, the catastrophe you witnessed, he ended his own life in the manner in which I am about to rid myself of a life henceforth insupportable. Adieu."

We all hastened to the lodgings of Arnold, to see if it was not possible to save him. The evil was without a remedy—the poor young man had blown out his brains, and was already dead.

Wildherr never rallied from the shock. It gradually undermined his health, and six months ago he died, after having destroyed, without opening, the portfolio of George Blumenhagen.

As to ourselves, whom he had taken for his confidants, we swore to bury this sad history in inviolable secrecy, but it was long before we forgot what Wildherr saw in the old castle of the Black Forest.